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ABSTRACT

Human sexuality classes were conducted with each of two groups (20 Ss in each) composed of randomly selected and assigned staff members at an institution for emotionally disturbed children. One group received conventional, didactic experiences in a large group environment; the other experienced informal, student-directed activities in a small group setting. To determine if there was a difference in sexual knowledge and attitude between groups following the course, a comparative analysis, based on pretest and posttest scores was made. Although no significant differences were found, additional questions were raised by the study and suggestions were made for future research. (Author/SBH)

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The Influence of Instructional Methods On Sexual Knowledge and Attitudes of Adult Students[1]

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Abstract

This paper reports the results of a study in which human sexuality classes were conducted with each of two groups, composed of randomly selected and assigned staff members at an institution for emotionally disturbed children. One group received conventional, didactic experiences in a large group environment; the other experienced informal, student-directed activities in a small group setting. The purpose of the study was to determine if there was a difference in sexual knowledge and attitude between the groups following the course. A comparative analysis, based on pretest and posttest scores, was made. Although no significant differences were found, additional questions were raised by this study and suggestions are made for future research.

The Influence of Instructional Methods On Sexual Knowledge and Attitudes of Adult Students

The offering of sex education in public schools is a recent phenomenon in the United States. Often accompanied by contention and controversy, and despite the fear that sex education teachers are peculiar people whose strange desires are kindled by teenage students (Breasted, 1970), the teaching of human sexuality has become part of standard school curricula. The fact that many parents are unable to teach sex information properly due to an overly emotional involvement with their children (Haims, 1973) may help explain why programs of the past fifteen years have become the duty and responsibility of each school and professionally trained staff (Francis, 1970). But where and how the staff obtains its training is of special significance to experts in the field. Such authors as Gordon (1973), W. R. Johnson (1973), Masters and V. E. Johnson (1970), and McCary (1973) all share a deep concern over the lack of systematic training of qualified people to teach this very sensitive subject. Thus, it would seem important to investigate which method of training sex education teachers is most beneficial for both their cognition of sexual data and their comfort in discussing sexual matters.

It has been reported that knowledge of sexual information and attitudes toward the various aspects of human sexuality are strongly correlated (Lance, 1975; Miller and Lief, 1976; Pauly

and Goldstein, 1971). Pauly and Goldstein (1971), utilizing an unspecified questionnaire in their research, show a significant correlation between knowledge and attitude. They also found that attitudes toward sexuality changed in subjects who had participated in no sex education courses, attributing these changes to the more knowledgeable, more sexually open atmosphere of today's culture. In their study, Fretz and W. R. Johnson (1971) indicated that an intensive sex education course had no significant effect on tne attitudes of the subjects, although their knowledge did increase. On the other hand, additional investigations dealing with this correlation have demonstrated that a more liberal attitude toward sexual activities of others and a more comfortable, more professional feeling in discussing sex followed from cognate learning (J. Johnson and Matek, 1974; Mims, Yeaworth, and Hornstein, 1974; Rosenberg and Chilgren, 1973; World Health Organization, 1975). In addition, specific desensitization, through the use of slang term glossaries, viewing pornographic films, sex quizzes, and especially role-playing, was also credited with reshaping attitudes (J. Johnson and Matek, 1974; Kelly, 1976; Tanner, 1974; World Health Organization, 1975).

A major problem with research in this field is that of the measurement of the dependent variable. Attempts were begun in 1965 to design a uniform, written test for post high school subjects that would reflect sexual attitudes, knowledge, personal

sexual experience, and biographical information for use by institutional researchers and social scientists. The revised 1972 Sex Knowledge and Attitude Test, (S.K.A.T.), Second Edition (Lief and Reed, Note 1) consists of four independent divisions, which include Attitudes (heterosexual relations, sexual myths, abortion, and autoeroticism), Knowledge (both heuristic and psychometric), Basic Information (personal background), and Frequency of Sexual Encounters. All items, which are multiple-choice or true-false, are regarded as having face, content, and construct validity. The results in J. Johnson and Matek (1974), Miller and Lief (1976), Rosenberg and Chilgren (1973), and Tanner (1974) were based on scores obtained from the Sex Knowledge and Attitude Test, (S.K.A.T.).

Investigations demonstrating that it is the method used to teach preparatory classes which provides the key to the most beneficial results have been conducted. Baird (1973) disclosed the importance of direct teacher-student contact in order to achieve positive consequences. He also discussed the need for clarity of teacher expectations and the effectiveness of sympathetic rewards, such as warmth. J. Johnson and Matek (1974) found that not only was didactic content important, but desensitization and direct practice were equally necessary for the student's best performance. A flexible format and a variety of methodology were deemed imperative by Jordan (1975). Tanner

(1974) also felt that the course's success was determined by the use of various techniques of instruction, encompassing, for example, objective lectures, guest panel discussions, and student-requested films. On the other hand, Stanton (1974) reported that it is the student's own personality that accounts for any differences in scores and not the use of different teaching procedures. In general, sex education classes in all these studies included lectures, guest speakers, desensitization, role-play, readings, films, and discussions; however, none investigated the dimension of large group versus small group situations as part of the teaching procedures under investigation.

Regardless of differences of opinion over increasing sexual knowledge in order to improve attitudes, and despite opposing viewpoints regarding the variety of instructional methods tested to find the most effective way to teach human sexuality, there remains the problem of preparing sensitive individuals who can combine information and encouragement with the restraint necessary to avoid interjecting personal values (Moglia and Wheeler, 1975). Therefore, it was the purpose of this study to determine the influence of teaching methods on sexual knowledge and attitudes for adults working in institutions for emotionally disturbed children.

The null hypothesis of this study was that there was no significant difference between students who receive conventional,

didactic experiences in a large group environment and students who receive informal, student-directed experiences in a small group environment in terms of adjusted mean scores on Part II of the Sex Knowledge and Attitude Test.

Method

Subjects

The forty subjects in this study were selected randomly from staff members at a large, suburban, residential school and hospital for emotionally disturbed children. Staff members at this institution represent a fair distribution of ethnic and socio-economic groups. The sample was divided into two classes with twenty subjects randomly assigned to each class. Both random selection of subjects and random assignment of subjects to groups were conducted by a representative from each department of the institution. An effort was made to insure that random selection and random assignment were carried out. Subjects represented a variety of educational levels, ranging from child-psychiatrists to care workers who had not attended high school. Their approximate average age was forty-three years. Each subject was excused from his or her work during class time, and arrangements were made to have someone take over each subject's work during these classes.

Materials

Part II of the Sex Knowledge and Attitude Test (S.K.A.T.), Second Edition, was used for pretesting and posttesting.

Procedure

Twenty subjects were randomly assigned to each of two groups. Both Group I and Group II were taught by the same teacher, who was a volunteer at the institution. Group I met in a small room from 9:30 a.m. to 11:00 a.m. once a week for seven consecutive weeks. Group II met in a larger room on the same morning as Group I for the same length of time but immediately following Group I's class.

In order to instigate and to stimulate student-directed activities in Group II, and to allow teacher-directed lessons for Group I without discouraging participation, a small box, designated the "Question/Discussion Box," was shown at the beginning of the first class to subjects in both Group I and Group II. Subjects were invited to use the papers and pencil provided to ask any questions or to suggest discussions for the next week's meeting. The Box was put in a conspicuous place each week, but it was not mentioned again to Group I after the initial meeting. Subjects in Group II were reminded about it at the start and the conclusion of each week's class.

Each session in the seven week series dealt with a different aspect of sexuality, as follows: puberty and adolescent sexuality; autoeroticism; heterosexuality, conception, pregnancy, and childbirth; contraception and abortion; homosexuality; venereal diseases; and sexual myths and deviations and variations in

human sexuality. A variety of teaching methods, including lecture, guests, discussions, role-play, slang "contests," films, desensitization sessions, and readings, were employed. All activities and discussions in Group I were conducted in a single large group. All details were decided on by the teacher. In Group II, however, all discussions and activities involved small groups of from two to five subjects, with subjects urged to arrange themselves into small groups for films or lectures. In addition, about ten minutes at the end of each Group II session was set aside for discussion in advance of the next week's topic. (The topic itself was decided by the teacher.) Discussion was encouraged in order to have the subjects, not the teacher, steer the following week's lesson. Such discussions were elicited mainly by questions directed to the subjects, such as "What do you think is meant by heterosexual activities?" "What is pornography?" or "Why do you think people are homosexual?"

The instrument, known as the Sex Knowledge and Attitude Test (S.K.A.T.), Second Edition, Part II, was administered to each group before the first session (pretest) and following the last class (posttest). Subjects were requested to identify their answer sheets at the pretest by either the last four digits of their social security numbers or the last four digits of their phone numbers. They were told to remember which number they used as they would be identified by it throughout the course. No

other written work was required of them until the posttest, at which time they were asked to use the same number for identification that they had used on the first answer sheet. It was thus found that two subjects in Group I and six subjects in Group II did not complete the course. There was no time limit set to finish the test, but no one took more than fifteen minutes at either the pretest or posttest. The measuring device was comprised of a technical manual, question booklets, answer sheets, and a set of hand-scoring keys, by which the raw scores on the pretest and posttest were obtained.

Results

To ensure the equivalency of the two groups, a univariate t-test for uncorrelated groups was conducted on the pretest mean scores. The maximum score is 50, and the minimum score is zero, with the higher scores indicating a greater degree of sexual knowledge and a more liberal attitude toward sex. Table 1 presents this analysis. No significant difference was found between

INSERT TABLE 1

the groups.

In order to obtain data necessary to test the hypothesis, gain scores between the pretest and the posttest were computed for each subject in Group I and in Group II. Differences between mean gain scores were analyzed by a univariate t-test for uncorrelated samples. Higher scores indicate greater improvement between the pretest score and the posttest score. Table 2 presents a summary of this analysis. The difference between

INSERT TABLE 2

groups was not found to be significant.

Discussion

The null hypothesis that there was no significant difference between students who receive conventional, didactic experiences in a large group environment and students who receive informal, student-directed experiences in a small group environment could not be rejected. This lack of significant difference may be partially attributable to the immutability of prior sexual beliefs and outlook. The continuation of sexual myths and misconceptions, affecting both knowledge and attitude, is persistent and not readily dispelled, even among a professional staff such as was involved in this study. It may thus be seen that a solitary seven week course, whether taught traditionally and as one large group or democratically and in several small groups, is not sufficient to overcome years of misinformation, misunderstanding,

and misinterpretation. This is not to imply that such changes cannot occur. Perhaps more positive results might be obtained through future research which includes courses conducted over a longer period of time than was dealt with in this study.

In previous research which reported significant differences, undergraduate and graduate school students were utilized as subjects. In the present study, all subjects had ended their formal education and were a minimum of fifteen years older than the average college student. The lack of extended schooling for some subjects, the number of years elapsed since classes had been attended by various subjects, and the advanced age of other subjects may all have contributed in part to the lack of significant attitude and knowledge changes in this study. Also, many prior studies failed to identify the measuring device and may not have found significant experimental effects had they used the same instrument utilized in the present study. In addition, the question of unpublished findings which also may not have found significant experimental effects should be considered when comparing this paper with other studies.

This study raises additional questions, indicating the need for further research. Future investigations into methods of teaching human sexuality to adults might consider, for example, optimum class size, best time of day to hold classes, most advantageous time span for courses, relation of education level to learning, and effect of age of students and age of teacher on improvement in sexual knowledge and attitudes.

Reference Notes

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TABLE 1

Means, Standard Deviations, and Univariate t ratio for Group I and Group II on the SKAT Pretest

	Group I (N=20)	Group II (N=20)
Mean	36.05	36.30
Standard Deviation	6.91	6.57

Note: t ratio = .11 (n.s.); df = 38

TABLE 2

Means, Standard Deviations, and Univariate t ratio for Group I and Group II on Gain Scores of the SKAT Pretest and Posttest

	Group I (N=18)	Group II (N=14)
Mean	2.77	1.36
Standard Deviation	3.76	2.84

Note: t ratio = 1.14 (n.s.); df = 30